

Water safety: Be in the know around H₂O

By *Teddi Dineley Johnson*

Ever wonder why the Earth looks mostly blue from outer space? It's because water occupies roughly two-thirds of the surface of our planet. We weren't born with gills, but millions of Americans are drawn to the wet stuff for swimming, surfing, fishing, sailing, boating, water skiing and canoeing.

Recreational water activities bring tons of year-round fun, but also some dangers, such as drownings. Many drownings occur in recreational water settings, including pools, lakes, rivers or oceans.

Some animals, when they are suddenly dropped into water, instinctively know how to swim. Not so with humans. We have to be taught.

"The best thing anyone can do to stay safe in, on and around the water is to learn to swim, and to swim well," advises Don Lauritzen, health and safety expert for the American Red Cross.

"Always swim with a buddy in areas supervised by a lifeguard and always obey posted rules," he says. "And never enter the water head-first unless the area is clearly marked for diving and has no obstructions."

Look cool at the pool

The shimmering blue water in a swimming pool can be irresistible to children, especially on a hot summer day. But drowning is a leading cause of accidental death for children. In the pool, stay close to your children — close enough to reach out and touch them at all times — and don't assume they are drown-proof just because they've had swimming lessons. Also, your kids might have been pretty good swimmers last summer, but that doesn't mean they still are. If they haven't been in a pool for a year, it will take some time for them to get back up to speed, so always maintain arm's length supervision.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, blow-up water wings, rafts and air mattresses should never be used in place of life jackets or life preservers. Only choose water safety gear

approved by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Keep in mind that rules vary from pool to pool. Your local pool might have a deep end that's great for diving, but a motel pool might be too shallow for diving. Wherever you go, read the rules.



Water, water everywhere

What do lakes, rivers, ponds and oceans have that swimming pools don't? Murky water, for one, as well as some surprising underwater stuff, including jagged rocks and broken bottles, unexpected drop-offs, water plants that can entangle you and some interesting sea critters, such as jellyfish, that may be dangerous. That said, it's not surprising that the majority of drownings among people older than 15 occur in natural water settings such as lakes, rivers and oceans.

To keep the fun flowing, swim only when and where there is a lifeguard on duty. Never enter water head-first until you know the depth, and make "first time, feet first" your mantra. Once you're in the water, check often to make sure you're not in over your head, or that you haven't drifted too far from shore.

Always be on the lookout for strong tides, big waves and currents that can change quickly. If you get caught in a strong current, don't fight it. Swim parallel to the shore until the water stops pulling you, then turn and swim toward the shore.

Unlike chlorinated swimming pools, natural water is not disinfected, so take extra care not to swallow it, and never swim after a heavy rain or in areas designated as unsafe by health departments.

Keep an eye on the sky

Make sure water and weather conditions are safe before you enter any body of water, be it an ocean, lake, river or swimming pool. Summer storms can pop up fast, and it's never safe to be in water when lightning is around. Water conducts electricity, which means it can travel through the water to wherever you happen to be swimming, fishing or boating. If you see lightning or hear thunder, get out of the water pronto, and don't get back in until 30



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minutes after you hear the last thunder boom. When the weather looks iffy, designate a responsible person to act as a weather safety lookout for the group.

Important notes on boats

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 700 people died in boating incidents in 2005, and thousands more were injured. Among those who drowned, 87 percent were not wearing life jackets. Just as you wouldn't ride in a car without buckling your seat belt, or ride a bike without a helmet, you should never ride in a boat without wearing a life jacket. A U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket should be worn by everyone in the boat, no matter the swimming ability of the boaters. If you plan to jet ski, water ski, raft, canoe or fish, keep that life jacket on.

Alcohol use is involved in about 25 percent to 50 percent of deaths associated with water recreation, so don't drink while boating or operating water equipment.

Familiarize yourself with these water safety tips, because whether you're in it, on it or around it, wet and wonderful water can provide hours of family fun, recreation and physical activity.



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